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ABSTRACT

For practical reasons, teachers of English as a second language abroad may choose not to learn the local language. However, the advantages of learning even a little of the language far outweigh any inconvenience caused by extra study time. First, teachers abroad lead more comfortable lives when not depending on others for basic needs such as buying food or mailing letters. Second, they gain the respect of students and others because language-learning efforts communicate the value of language and culture and may help the teacher understand specific classroom problems such as pronunciation or discussion difficulties. Third, and perhaps most significant, is the effect that learning another language has on one's teaching philosophy, improving empathy and confidence by modeling second language practice. (MSE)

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SHOULD I LEARN THE LOCAL LANGUAGE WHEN TEACHING ABROAD?

Abstract of a paper presented at the 1988 TESOL Conference, Chicago

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We English teachers have the opportunity to work anywhere in the world. For very practical reasons, we may say "I'm here to teach English, not to learn language x" or "I'll only be there a year". Citing personal experience with Serbo-Croatian and Chinese, the author argues that the advantages of learning even a little of the language far outweigh any inconvenience caused by extra study time.

First, we lead more comfortable lives when we don't have to depend upon other people to take care of our basic needs, such as buying food or mailing letters. Second, we gain the respect of our students and others because our efforts tell them we value their language and culture. Furthermore, we may begin to comprehend, for example, why students have specific pronunciation problems or why certain discussion topics fail. The better we understand our students, the better we can teach them.

Third, perhaps the most significant advantage of learning language x is the effect it has upon our teaching philosophy. As practitioners of language, we should take advantage of the opportunity to empathize with our students, to feel what it's like to be a foreign language learner. When we tell our students, for example, that they learn from their mistakes in speaking English and then they hear us communicating effectively in their language despite our learners' errors, we feel more certain about our theories and students are more likely to have confidence in our teaching expertise when we practice what we preach.

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SHOULD I LEARN THE LOCAL LANGUAGE WHEN TEACHING ABROAD?

A paper presented at the 22nd Annual TESOL Convention
Chicago, March 1988

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Introduction and Rationale

A few weeks ago, the wife of one of my colleagues said to me, "My children have some American teachers who say they don't even want to learn Chinese!" The school in question is a local elementary and secondary school (12 grades) with a track for bilingual children and a track for gifted children. The comment was made by an educated Chinese woman who had lived in the United States for ten years and whose three teenagers are all native speakers of English. If an educated, well-travelled person makes such a complaint, then perhaps "average" parents all over the world may have even stronger feelings about their children's foreign teachers being able to speak the native language of the students, even if they use only English in the classroom.

We English teachers are very lucky to have the opportunity to work almost anywhere in the world, from the poorest to the richest areas, in cultures very similar to or very different from our own. Most of us are adaptable enough and have enough sense of adventure to cope with whatever situation we may find ourselves in. Perhaps the best advice to the teacher contemplating taking a position abroad is to learn as much as

possible about the new culture, ideally before moving there. Learning the meaning of the strange things around you helps you to feel comfortable with them.

The most important aspect of learning about a new culture is learning the language. Whether or not we accept the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis in its strong form, that language affects thought (Clark & Clark, 1977), most people would probably agree that expressing ourselves in another language teaches us to think about the world in a slightly different way, and it helps us to view the world the way speakers of that language or, more specifically, that culture view it.

If you are an EFL teacher going abroad for the first time, you may be tempted to say "I'm only going to stay for one year. Why should I bother learning the language?" In reality, with the job situation as it is today, there are only a few people who can be certain they will stay only one year, and they are for the most part somewhat famous people who go on one-year teaching exchanges or research grants and have tenured positions to return to. Most new teachers cannot count on having a job waiting for several reasons. First, as we know all too well, a good ESL position in the United States is not all that easy to find, especially if you don't have a lot of experience and publications. Second, if you are in a foreign country, you just don't have the access to job announcements as you do in the United States. The TESOL Employment Information Service does a good job, but your own local mail service and just distance may cause delays. You may hear about positions too late, or you may not be able to submit

relevant materials in time, not to mention your inability to appear for an interview. Third, you may decide or be persuaded to remain in the foreign position longer. This is probably the most typical situation. As you get used to the new place, you find that one year is not enough. And since many positions are one year, but renewable, you may very easily find yourself working in a foreign country for several years.

Some EFL teachers may think they would be wasting their time studying the local language, saying "I'm going there to teach English, not to learn language x." Of course, learning a new language takes some time and effort, especially if it is a non-European language, a language that expresses its concepts somewhat differently than English, Spanish, French, or German do. Recent graduates in particular may feel that they don't want to study any more. Or they may say "I won't have enough time to master language x, so why begin?" Or "My course load is too heavy--I don't have time." Nevertheless, I firmly believe that the advantages of learning even a little of the local language far outweigh any inconvenience caused by extra study time. This paper strongly supports the thesis that the EFL teacher going abroad should attempt to learn the language of the host country for four very important reasons: first, increased personal comfort and convenience; second, greater teaching effectiveness; third, richer relationships with students, colleagues, and locals; and fourth, enhancement of professional growth. A discussion of these advantages follows in the next four sections of this paper, followed by concluding remarks.

Personal Comfort and Convenience

Perhaps the most obvious reason for learning the local language is for our own personal comfort and convenience. When we first arrive in the new country, our colleagues may be more than happy to help us get settled, but we should not depend upon such assistance. When I arrived in Montenegro, Yugoslavia, the secretary of the Economics Institute was assigned to find me an apartment. She spoke Serbian and a little Russian, no English. She located a great landlord and apartment for me; however, neither the landlord nor any of my neighbors spoke any English. I had never studied Serbian and hadn't the time to study intensively during the four months between the time my assignment was made and my arrival because I was rushing to complete my dissertation. Fortunately, I had studied Russian, and the Slavic languages are similar enough that speakers who make an effort can communicate basic meanings. I had a rather difficult time trying to convince the landlord that he had to register me with the local police. The United States Embassy in Belgrade had explained this law very clearly to us new Fulbrighters, yet the department chairman claimed never to have heard of this. Furthermore, no one at the main school I was assigned to showed me where the vegetable market was, where to buy meat, or how to ride the local bus, basically because no one spent time in their offices since they were too busy travelling to various parts of the city to teach their courses. Later there was one colleague who advised me when she could, but she had to work in another city during the week, so basically I was on my own in a city where the man in the street and the clerk in the shop spoke no English.

The situation in Taiwan was much different. Most of the faculty members, even those in the sciences, could speak English. This was fortunate, since I could speak no Chinese. When I arrived, there was more than enough assistance. Housing was provided on campus, so my neighbors were my colleagues. In addition to all the help from the Chinese, there were even a few other Americans who could help me with questions that Americans in particular might ask, from explaining Chinese attitudes and customs to showing me where to shop for western food supplies. I hope EFL teachers find this latter, helpful situation to be the more common one.

But no matter how warm the welcome and how helpful the colleagues, there comes a time when we have to go to the post office, or buy a bus ticket, or go for a haircut ourselves. We must remember that EFL jobs are often in places where the level of English language hasn't been very high, places sometimes considered more "backward" areas, as was the case with Montenegro, one of the regions not as well developed as Northern and Western Yugoslavia. But even if the level of English is rather high, as it is in Taiwan, where everyone now begins to study English in junior high school, most of the people we deal with in everyday life outside our jobs do not have a very high level of education, and hence they may speak and understand little or no English. These are the bus drivers, the storekeepers, the meat and vegetable vendors, and the myriad of clerks working everywhere from train stations to telephone companies. Let's face it--sign language doesn't get you very far.

And by the time they find someone who speaks English, he's just in time to tell you your train just left!

Any seasoned traveller will tell you that the first words to start with are the useful ones. Numbers. "How much does it cost?" (and understanding the answer). "Where is x?" Your address and the name of your department on campus. This is especially useful for telling taxi or bus drivers if you get lost. Of course, we should learn the polite phrases, such as "How are you? Fine. Please. Thank you. You're welcome. I'm sorry (or) Excuse me. Good-bye." Other phrases may be added as necessary, such as "A round trip ticket to x. These are absolutely necessary for survival.

Survival may be enough for the short term, if it's a one year or shorter exchange and you must definitely return to your permanent job. But most teachers are not in that position, and temporary often turns into two or more years. Quite frankly, one year is not enough anywhere. The first year is the learning year--for the teacher. You learn the system, how things work, how they do things in country x, and you learn about the students and how to teach them. Too much of the first year, especially the first semester, is spent in what seems like bureaucratic busywork (housing, residence permits, work permits, etc.) and just plain adjusting to a new way of life. For example, tasks that we take for granted in our home culture, such as getting a telephone, may take hours of our time going from place to place, if indeed we can even get a telephone at all or afford the exorbitant fees.

So unless your plans are quite definite, you may be staying

longer than you think. Of course, it would be useful to be able to speak the host language when you arrive, but this is often next to impossible, since job offers often come a few months, or even a few weeks, before the starting date. And even if you can speak a little, one of your jobs during the first month should be to arrange for lessons. Start by asking your colleagues. At least one of them should be able to put you in contact with a teacher s/he knows or has heard of. Other foreigners in particular may be able to recommend language teachers they or their acquaintances study with. At this point, even the most elementary lessons will give you basic phrases you need, and your teacher can correct your pronunciation.

Greater Teaching Effectiveness

Being a native speaker of English has obvious advantages. Native speakers, even those with no teacher training or experience, are often put to work teaching conversation courses or other more advanced classes. Although the reason given is usually to give advanced students the opportunity to use their English with a native speaker, especially if the local teachers feel that their English is limited, there may be another, less flattering reason. Many people believe that teachers who do not speak the students' language cannot teach them another language at the elementary and perhaps intermediate levels. Of course, we know this is not true. Beginning students in the United States and other English speaking countries are taught successfully using only English. There are two important differences, though. First, beginning foreign students in the United States are in an

English speaking environment and may be more highly motivated. Second, ESL students usually have different native languages. However, when we teach English abroad, in most situations our students share the same native language, and teachers who do not share that code may not be considered as capable of teaching beginning courses as local teachers, who can use the local language for explanations and who may have a better understanding of student difficulties.

Yet even in teaching the more advanced levels there are certain advantages in knowing the students' native language, even if we do not use it in the classroom. The most obvious examples concern pronunciation. For example, a few of my students in Taiwan have trouble with the voiced fricative [z], pronouncing zoo with the affricate [dz] as dzoo, or occasionally what sounds like roo, with a retroflex [r]. This is not surprising, since Mandarin Chinese has no fricative [z], but it does have the affricate [dz] and an almost fricative-sounding retroflex [r], both of which occur in syllable initial position, but never in syllable final position. Mandarin does have the fricative [s], so most often I teach [z] through [s].

To cite one more example from pronunciation, many Chinese students tend to substitute [] for [e], pronouncing the vowel less tense than it should be. Although most students can produce the sound in isolation, I had one student who came up with [] every time, no matter how much I or some of the other students tried to have her mimic us. Finally, I said "What do you say when you answer the telephone?" At first she looked even more

confused and said "Hello?" I said, "No, in Chinese." She then said "Wei," and I said, "That's the sound we want." Now this has become almost a joke in our class; whenever a student says [] for [e], I just say "telephone" and the student has a chance to self-correct. Knowing the sound system of Mandarin helps me to see the source of student problems and to devise ways of helping students with major English pronunciation problems to approximate the English sounds. I can see now how local teachers do have some advantages because they can help students through their native language.

We may also be able to see why student make errors in grammar and syntax. For example, when my students in Taiwan say "How about today's weather?" as an opening statement and request for information, they are using a translation for the Mandarin Jintyan tyanchi dzemma yang?, literally "Today the weather, what manner?", although we would say in English either "How's the weather today?" or "What's the weather like today?" In Mandarin, dzemma yang, literally means "what manner or style?", usually translated "how about?" as in eliciting a response to a suggestion, for example Chyu kan dyanyingr dzemma yang?, literally "Go see a movie, how about it?", in English "How about going to a movie?" In Standard Mandarin Chinese the phrase dzemma yang has a broader range of use than its literal translation does in English.

As I study Mandarin, I see more and more examples of sources of student pronunciation, grammar and syntax errors. If you learn a little of your students' language, you too may be able to locate the sources of some student difficulties with English and it may give you a starting point in how to solve these

difficulties. Beyond this, you may also learn during your language study some aspects of the culture, which may enable you to see, for example, why certain discussion topics or role plays do not work. Are they taboo topics, unrealistic, or beyond the students' experience? Or one day you may assign an oral report or composition and find that almost all the students have plagiarized. Don't be shocked! Find out first how students are taught in the elementary and secondary schools. In some cultures, copying famous works is considered the way to acquire good writing skills. If this is so, then you must teach your students about a cultural difference and very patiently show them how to use quotations, paraphrase, and how to cite another's work. While these differences are not strictly language concerns, you are more likely to learn about them and be more understanding of them from inside the local setting than from outside.

Richer Relationships with Students, Colleagues, and Locals

There are some even more subtle advantages to being able to speak and understand a little of the students' language. Let the following story serve as an example. When I was in Montenegro in 1983-84, early in the spring semester the following event occurred. As both students and I were entering the classroom one afternoon and settling ourselves, I heard one male student ask his classmates "Kako se kaze senf na engleski?" which means "How do you say senf in English?" Before anyone else replied, without even looking up from the papers I was sorting, I said "mustard". It took a few seconds for the students' mouths to open and their eyes to widen. Then I heard murmurs "Ona razumije

nas jezik." which means "She understands our language." I think I may have uttered a few appropriate phrases in Serbian, playing to my receptive audience, before going on with the lesson in English. But from that day on, my relationship with that class was different. It was somehow more open and warm, less formal. Students were more willing to speak, interrupt, ask questions. One of their favorite tricks was then to get a student from another department to ask me some questions in Serbian outside of the classroom, as my students crowded around to listen to my Serbian. This was in no way malicious; in fact, I had as much fun as the students, sometimes asking them for help with vocabulary. This situation gave me a reason to spend a few minutes of class time now and then to talk about language learning and teaching theory, relating it to my foreign language learning strategy and theirs. This was certainly appropriate, since they were students at the Teachers College and most would become teachers.

I am convinced that my speaking some Serbian helped the students to accept me as one of them instead of just another foreigner; therefore, they were more willing to accept what I had to teach as a little more valuable. A further proof comes from what I found outside the university, with other Yugoslavs I dealt with on a day-to-day basis. I had approximately the following conversation many times with merchants, vegetable vendors, taxi drivers, and such. After a little business conversation, I heard "Odakle ste vi?" "Where are you from?" When I answered "Iz Amerike," "From America," they would continue in Serbian "Are

your parents Yugoslavs?" "No." "Your grandparents?" "No."

"Then how can you speak our language so well?" "My grandparents came from Czechoslovakia." At that point I would hear "O, vi ste nase," meaning "You're one of ours." It seemed they were willing to stretch the definition to include me. This type of situation made for very pleasant conversation and sometimes even lower prices.

After about four months in Yugoslavia, my Serbian got to the point where I was often taken as a Yugoslav from another part of the country. Thus it became easy for me to pass as a Yugoslav, with all the advantages and disadvantages that went with it, because I look Central European. Now this isn't at all likely to happen to me in Taiwan. I certainly won't be mistaken for a Chinese by my looks. But, more importantly, my Chinese ability is only minimal after three years. Every day I am conscious of what I still cannot say. I started as a beginner when I arrived, only being able to say "How are you?" and "Thank you." During the past three years, I've only had time for two or three hours of Chinese lessons per week with a private tutor.

Yet even with my little bit of Chinese, students show surprise when they hear me speak. I use English with them both inside and outside of the classroom because they need all the input they can get. But sometimes they overhear me using Chinese, and I get the same reaction as I did in Yugoslavia--open mouths, wide eyes, expressions of pleasant surprise. I'm sure this is a positive point in my relationship with the students.

Moreover, Chinese people are extremely polite, telling the foreigner how wonderful his Chinese is, even if he can only say a

few phrases. Yet this is all very encouraging to the beginner. The students are polite, too. Asian students in general have much more respect for their teachers than American students do. For example, in Taiwan September 28 is a national holiday-- Confucius' Birthday, and because Confucius was such a great teacher, this day is also Teachers' Day, when everyone from elementary school pupils to government leaders honors teachers. In such a society, it is a very rewarding profession, but it is even more so when you meet the students outside of class and exchange greetings sometimes in their language, in addition to English. No matter how foreign you may look, speaking the local language makes you appear a little less foreign on the outside, and you feel a little less foreign on the inside, too.

Enhancement of Professional Growth

Language teaching is our profession. Consequently, we cannot ignore language learning and learners. Teaching abroad gives us the unique opportunity to be language learners in a foreign language environment. This situation is not at all like the foreign language learning we did in high school or college, where we just dabbled in the language at our ease and did not have to use it for real, everyday communication. In the foreign country, we can feel something of what our beginning ESL learners feel when they come to an English speaking country, when they encounter a total language environment and cultural differences all at once. We can feel their sense of inadequacy, of alienation, their fear of failure.

We can see how the theories work in practice when we

ourselves experience how learners learn. It's very slow at first. Even memorizing a few phrases is hard. The language may have new sounds or new combinations of sounds. The mouth hurts. The head hurts. My first Chinese lessons were only one hour long, but I had a headache and felt like sleeping after only half an hour during that October and part of November. I dreaded my lessons and felt that I would never learn anything. During December, I started to feel like I was learning very rapidly, only to find myself stuck around June. It seemed as though there was no more room in my head for anything new. I was aware that I had hit a temporary plateau and, fortunately, this was vacation time, so, leaving my Chinese book behind, I headed for Yugoslavia and spoke only Serbo-Croatian for six weeks. When I returned to Taiwan, I found I had not forgotten Chinese at all, but I was actually hungry to learn more and more.

Of course, I still hit temporary plateaus, but I don't worry about them. On those days, my Chinese lessons are just free conversation, where I have a chance to practice old vocabulary and structures before I'm ready to move on to the new. Now I really see the value of free conversation with the teacher. He knows what I don't know, so he can give me comprehensible input (call it $i + 1$ if you like) and help me to say what I want to say using what I already have and maybe adding some new vocabulary. I'm really enjoying watching myself learn Chinese and gaining personal insights into the language learning process.

We may also discover ways to learn language outside of class. I find television extremely useful. Of course, watching

TV is entertaining, so it doesn't feel like work. I sometimes watch programs in English just for fun, to hear English and see familiar looking faces. American shows dubbed in Mandarin are good for me because the story line and dialogue are somewhat predictable. When I have the time, I like to watch the nightly news and weather. These broadcasts have several advantages for learners. First of all, newscasters generally speak the standard language clearly and at normal speed. Second, there are often pictures to go with the news story that aid in comprehension. Third, vocabulary is often repeated night after night as the same stories may be in the news, such as the appreciation of the Taiwan dollar, the United States presidential campaign, or the crisis in the Middle East. The weather forecast is also useful because it has a somewhat limited range of information and is therefore more easily comprehended.

Whereas I could understand radio broadcasts reasonably well in Serbo-Croatian, I'm not ready to do that in Chinese. There is an English language station in Taiwan that our students listen to, but they complain that they can't understand everything, and that news broadcasts are too fast. All I can tell them is that they won't understand everything, but that they should try to get as much as they can. Because I read the English language newspaper every day, I am already familiar with some of the stories I see on the nightly news and therefore I understand more. So I tell students they should keep up with the news in Chinese first. If they already know the story, it's a lot easier to figure out the meaning when they hear the English. I believe this method works and I say it with conviction, not because I

read it somewhere, but because it is part of my personal experience.

Our natural curiosity should also make us want to learn about the languages around us and the different characteristics that they may have. This is especially exciting if we have only studied Indo-European languages before, notably French, Spanish, or German, all of which have many features in common with English. Now we have a chance to learn a different alphabet or syllabary, such as Thai or Arabic, or a language that has a different character for each word, such as Chinese, or one as complex as Japanese, which uses two syllabaries and almost 2000 Chinese characters. We may have the pleasure and pain of learning to distinguish tones, as in Chinese or Thai. We can learn to think of actions in terms of aspect rather than tense, as in Chinese and, to some extent the Slavic languages, which use both tense and aspect. We can discover languages like Chinese (similar to English) that depend primarily on word order, or those like Japanese, which use particles extensively, or those like the Slavic languages, which are highly inflected. We can learn to take the status of listener and speaker and topic into account when using the necessary politeness markers of Japanese. Certainly the languages of the world in their many forms must be fascinating to any language teacher. We can better appreciate the features that make up the English language when we experience how other languages operate.

Conclusions

Today we have looked at the various advantages there are in

learning the local language when teaching abroad. Our personal lives are more comfortable, our relationships with our students go more smoothly, and we can experience first-hand the language learning process. There is one other important point I haven't mentioned so far--culture shock, the feeling of alienation you get when you move to a new place, especially a foreign country (Brown, 1980; Condon & Yousef, 1975). No one is immune to all forms of it, although sometimes it does get easier the second time around, as we learn more about ourselves and how to combat culture shock. In the long term, if we ever return to teaching foreign students in an English speaking country, we will be more able to empathize with our students' difficulties with acculturation. More importantly, in the short term, we will have to live through our own experiences of culture shock. We will never be able to move beyond stage two--alienation--to stage three--gradual acculturation--if we do not learn the local language. We will remain illiterate mutes, feeling more and more alienated because of our helplessness.

Of course, you can choose to remain an aloof foreigner, not lowering yourself to speaking someone else's language poorly. But how many times have we read about learning from our mistakes? The theory says errors are part of the language learning process. Don't you believe it's true? Why should your students believe you if you're not brave enough to try it out yourself?

Certainly we are going to make mistakes. Sometimes people won't understand us; sometimes they will laugh at us; sometimes we might just want to go home and cry. This is going to happen

and there's nothing we can do about it. We just have to come to terms with ourselves. An American friend who has taught abroad for many years put it this way: "When you live in a foreign country, you just can't take yourself too seriously."

Then imagine your joy the first time you use your new language to tell a taxi driver where you want to go, and he takes you to the right place immediately, without even trying to overcharge you. Or the sense of well-being when you go to the morning market and your favorite meat and vegetable vendors greet you and you exchange some small talk. There will still be times when communication breaks down, but those times will become fewer and fewer. Learning the language will help you understand why the culture is the way it is and help you to understand and accept it. Using the language more and more successfully will lower your feelings of helplessness and heighten your self-confidence. And those pleasant little encounters with others will give you a more positive attitude toward the culture, lowering affective barriers, which may aid you in learning even more effectively. This in turn will give you a great sense of personal accomplishment, and you will be much happier in your new life. Adjustment will be easier.

Working in a foreign country is exciting. Learning the language gives you access to a whole new world. My ideas come from teaching one year in Yugoslavia and three years in Taiwan. What you will find in other countries may be a little bit different, but I'm sure that those of you who have lived abroad will agree that learning a foreign language within the foreign culture is an enriching experience that should not be missed. To

sum up, let me modify an old saying: "When in Rome, do as the Romans do"--and speak Italian!

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